

The Fastness of Forgetting: **An Exploration of Memory, Narrative and Emergent Meaning**

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‘The Fastness of Forgetting’ is an interdisciplinary performance work featuring live musical performance, video projection and sound diffusion, combining Image, Text and Sound in a number of contexts. The initial idea for the work came from a passage in Milan Kundera’s novel ‘Slowness’, which I happened to come across as a quotation in an essay on time and narrative¹.

“There is a secret bond between slowness and memory, between speed and forgetting... the degree of slowness is directly proportional to the intensity of memory; the degree of speed is directly proportional to the intensity of forgetting.”²

Kundera describes observing someone walking along the street, who then slows down, as if to recall something from memory, and conversely “... a person who wants to forget a disagreeable incident he has just lived through starts unconsciously to speed up his pace, as if he were trying to distance himself from a thing still close to him in time”.³ I found Kundera’s association of memory with slowness intriguing and these ideas had strong resonances with my own work and creative preoccupations. In the same section of *Slowness* Kundera also writes: “Imposing form on a period of time is what beauty demands, but so too does memory. For what is formless cannot be grasped or committed to memory.”⁴ This idea highlights the essential nature of temporal art forms, such as music and film/video, and provides a strong conceptual link between the role of memory in our daily lives and in the way we perceive and understand art. These excerpts from Kundera’s novel were a gift – providing me with a conceptual and structural starting point for a work that had been forming in the back of my mind for some time.

¹ Helmut Friedel, ‘Why has pleasure in slowness disappeared?’, in *Moments in Time*, 1999

² Milan Kundera, *Slowness*

³ *ibid.* p34

⁴ *ibid.*

In 'The Fastness of Forgetting' my intention is to create work that allows for a number of reincarnations in different contexts and environments. The initial phase of this creative project is a 30 minute performance work which forms the basis for a series of possible reinterpretations; an installation work incorporating sound and image from the performance piece, and also a reworking of material in a computer based virtual interactive environment. At the time of writing, these two phases are in the planning stage, so for the purposes of the current discussion I will focus primarily on the live multimedia performance event premiered in Brisbane in October 2004 by Topology ensemble.

'The Fastness of Forgetting' explores Time through a variety of lenses: Time as it is understood historically (personal and family history, memory, cultural symbols for the past) and Temporality, time as it is experienced and perceived (perceived duration, structuring of duration, speed and slowness). Music/Sound and Film have often been described as means of 'capturing' time, allowing us to record, reorder and manipulate sonic or visual events in time. In Andrey Tarkovsky's book *Sculpting in Time* the Russian filmmaker describes the power of memory in our lives and how his can be exploited through film. He sees the power of memory (and by implication, film) as the ability to capture and stabilise the present; "In a certain sense, the past is far more real, or at any rate, more stable, more resilient than the present. The present slips away and vanishes like sand between the fingers, acquiring material weight only in its recollection."⁵

The nature of recorded sound and image has much in common with our own personal experience of time, most notably through the functions of memory as our own internalised means of 'capturing' events and experiences. Susanne Langer draws a clear parallel between film and memory and what she refers to as the 'dream mode'. Like memory, film can represent a non linear experience of time where events are re-ordered and recontextualised. She describes the primary illusion of film as being a sense of "virtual history"⁶ where moments in time are arranged and memories constructed and recalled. Just as a film director arranges and orders their visual material, or a composer arranges their sonic material in time, memory fulfils a similar function in creating our own internal narrative or sense of personal history. Langer states, "Memory is the great organiser of consciousness. It simplifies and composes our perception into units and personal knowledge. It is

⁵ Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, page 58

⁶ Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form*, page 412

the real maker of history – not recorded history, but the sense of history itself.”⁷

This close connection between memory, perception and temporality is again reflected upon in Henri Bergson’s essay ‘Duration and Intuition’⁸. Bergson ponders on his awareness of his own perceptions and notices “the memories which more or less adhere to these perceptions and which serve to interpret them.”⁹ In Bergson’s view, memory is central to perception, allowing us to make sense of what we experience. Memory is also central to Bergson’s concept of the nature of consciousness and duration, which he describes as being a continual unfolding of perception where each moment of awareness is perceived in relationship to that which has gone before such that nothing is ever perceived or experienced in the same way twice. As he states, “A consciousness which could experience two identical moments would be a consciousness without memory.”¹⁰ The main aesthetic objective in ‘The Fastness of Forgetting’ has been to explore the poetic implications of memory and time, both in terms of the types of sonic and visual images used and in the ways in which these images are developed and structured through time.

Much of the sonic and visual imagery used in ‘The Fastness of Forgetting’ reflect an idiosyncratic lexicon of signs and symbols relating to memory, recollection, and a sense of past and absence. Many of my previous works have explored the associative power of recorded sound and its ability to capture a particular sense of time or place [see McCombe 2003, 2001]. In ‘The Fastness of Forgetting’ I incorporate a variety of recorded sounds (in the form of electroacoustic soundscapes) which for me are redolent of memory and personal history; these include recordings of a music box, cicadas on a hot afternoon, an out of tune piano. The visual material similarly incorporates images which strongly suggest a sense of the past or recollection; super 8 home movies from the 1960s, old photos and letters, a road trip filmed through a car window, interiors of a derelict house. I have also incorporated images of clouds and water which for me connote sites of contemplation and recollection. Text is also incorporated into the mix of sound and image at several points through the work, primarily in the form of floating lines of text quotation moving across and between projected visual images, and later in the work fragments of old letters are woven into the visual material. The floating text functions as a conceptual focus, using quotations from Kundera’s

⁷ *ibid.* p.263

⁸ Henri Bergson, ‘Duration and Intuition’ in *Problems of Time and Space*,

⁹ *Ibid.* page 139

¹⁰ *Ibid.* page 140

novel and other sources to elucidate particular ideas and themes in the work. The fragments of old letters have a much more abstract function, giving glimpses of personal narratives but without 'telling a story' as such.

These sonic and visual images are woven together in a series of episodes or moments in time. The relationship between the sounds and images is rarely a direct one, with little or no diegetic sound used. Instead the images coincide with composed electroacoustic soundscapes and music performed live, not as a 'score' to the film images, but as an equal partner contributing to the field of association and emergent meaning. At times a sense of continuity in the sounds works with discontinuity in the projected images, and vice versa. At other instances in the work, obviously representational images are combined with more abstract material. The dynamic between sound and image constantly shifts and changes, with the intention of creating a discursive relationship between the visual and sonic, and extending the range of possible readings and interpretations.

In his book *Analysing Musical Multimedia*, Nicholas Cook describes how music/sound can function in association with other media to create 'emergent meaning'. Cook discusses a variety of analytical models for how meaning is constructed through the combining of music with other media. A particular piece of music (or sound) may have certain cultural associations or embedded meanings; a sequence of visual images may imply an alternative narrative or meaning. Yet in the combining of these two media a range of potential *emergent meanings* are created through a variety of relationships ranging from juxtaposition to a "transfer of attributes"¹¹ between the visual and sonic. This approach to the analysis of multimedia works provides an insight into the complex hermeneutic relationships between sound and image and the ways in which 'meaning' is actively interpreted by the listener/viewer/audience. These relationships are explored through the combining, juxtaposing and recontextualising of sonic and visual elements in 'The Fastness of Forgetting'.

Musicologist Eero Tarasti suggests "As a general rule, the minimal condition of narrativity is the transformation of an object or state of affairs into something else through a process that requires a certain amount of time".¹² Given this broad definition, he argues that music is fundamentally a narrative art, different musical forms and structures outlining different narrative approaches. Although Tarasti is not claiming that only temporal art forms can be narrative, his definition of

¹¹ Nicholas Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia*, page 85

¹² Eero Tarasti, 'Music as a Narrative Art' in *Narrative Across Media*

narrative illustrates the strong connection between narrativity and temporality, or the way we experience things through time. In his book *The Time of Music*, Jonathan Kramer proposes a series of strategies for analysing music from a temporal perspective. His premise is that we experience and understand music through time, "Music unfolds in time. Time unfolds in music."¹³ Kramer suggests that elements such as continuity and discontinuity, development and repetition, tempo, level of predictability and the large scale structural proportion of musical works impact on the way we experience time in music. The concepts of linearity and non-linearity are central to Kramer's approach, linearity implying an organically evolving musical fabric, and non linearity emphasising aspects of repetition and discontinuity. He outlines a series of 'temporal modes', including various types of musical linearity and non-linearity, which are intended to be used as analytical tools with which to examine musical texture and structure from the point of view of its temporal impact on the listener.

As described earlier, 'The Fastness of Forgetting' combines live musical performance with electroacoustic composition and video projection. The three main compositions written to be performed live by the instrumental ensemble explore different approaches to musical temporality, each outlining a particular musical structure or narrative. These musical narratives can in turn also function as metaphors for non musical narratives. These three pieces exist as self contained musical units which sit within the wider temporal structure of the work. The first piece played by the ensemble consists of a high level of repetition and discontinuity, various musical figures being juxtaposed and revisited. This structure implies a narrative lacking in direction and resolution, with little sense of linear development. The speed of the piece is also significant, particularly with reference to the Kundera quote around which the piece is based (referred to earlier in this paper), equating speed with forgetting. The tempo is fast and the musical figures create a sense of continual movement and activity, while the level of repetition and discontinuity negate any clear sense of linear progression and development. This piece can be understood as a musical metaphor for Kundera's image of someone trying to avoid an unpleasant thought through avoidance and activity.

The second ensemble piece suggests a more linear musical narrative, where melodic lines develop and unfurl, looping back over themselves and then continuing forward, creating a sense of movement and direction. This linear melodic unfolding is contrasted with a sequence of ascending chords which interject into the melodic texture at various points throughout the piece. The melodic material outlines one train of

¹³ Jonathan Kramer. *The Time of Music*.

musical thought while the chord sequence outlines its own forward movement and ascending process, the piece thus outlining two independent but intertwining musical narratives. The non musical analogue for this structure could be understood as a searching for and moving towards a perceived goal, perhaps the piecing together of a past sequence of events in memory.

The third ensemble piece is based around a slow steady pulse repeated on a single pitch which gives a clear sense of marking out musical time, in much the same way as a clock ticking. Around this steady musical pulse accompanying melodic figures meander around a constant pitch field. These melodic figures are highly improvisatory in nature and rather than reflecting a strong sense of forward movement and thematic development, they can be understood as a constant reshaping of the musical present. Similarly, the slow and constant musical pulse and could be interpreted to symbolise the unstoppable forward movement of time, the passing of time and the passing of the present into the past.

The role of speed and temporality is explored in the visual as well as in the sonic material of 'The Fastness of Forgetting'. Just as continuity and discontinuity, linearity and repetition are explored in the music, video editing is also utilised to create varying experiences of visual time. The opening video sequence of the work consists of a rapidly changing series of various images, most of which appear during the course of the work as a whole. Some are just fleeting moments while other images linger long enough to make a clearer impact on the viewer before the next image appears. This rapid visual montage becomes more rapid in its editing until the images become a blur of light and colour. This sequence has a high level of repetition and discontinuity of image but the clearly structured approach to the editing creates a clear sense of visual trajectory. In contrast, a later visual sequence consists of images of water and clouds which morph into each other in a slow and almost imperceptible transition. This sequence is much more redolent of stillness and the high level of visual continuity and slow rate of change projects a quite different sense of visual time, while the images themselves were chosen to signify contemplation and recollection (as discussed earlier with reference to the construction of my lexicon of images and symbols).

One of the central devices of 'The Fastness of Forgetting' is the exploration of memory through the polarity of absence and presence, past and present. The live performance of music by the ensemble represents a real, embodied and visceral musical present which is in marked contrast to the use of diffused 'recorded' music and sound heard through speakers in the performance space. These 'found' sounds, and their re-contextualisation as part of the performance,

represent a disembodied and absent sound world, where the recorded sonic past is re-presented in a different time and location. Recorded sounds can function as clear sign posts for memory, evoking images and associations in the listener. This juxtaposing of the visceral and incorporeal functions as a powerful metaphor for our experience of present and past, presence and absence. Sean Cubitt explores these ideas in his book *Digital Aesthetics* where he discusses the 'mobilisation' of sound afforded by digital sound recording, where "every recording is a piece of the past restorable to the present"¹⁴. He continues, "recording technologies are like photographs, dependent on the odd dialectic of presence and absence, where the presence of the recording demands the absence of the performance, a distance which is both temporal and geographic."¹⁵

The mobilisation of sound also allows for the temporal reordering of sound, where the concepts of past and present and the functions of memory can be manipulated. This is a device I have used in 'The Fastness of Forgetting' to simulate the ways in which memories are stored and revisited in our imaginations. A sound can be heard in one context and then revisited in another, the second hearing is informed by the memory of the first, contributing to the creation of associative meaning. Similarly, visual images glimpsed in the opening video sequence of the work are revisited at various points during the unfolding of the work as a whole.

This pre-empting of images and the embedding of 'memories' within the work is most obvious in the final music heard in the performance of 'The Fastness of Forgetting'. This piece was heard earlier in the work as a recording of an out of tune piano incorporated into a soundscape, accompanying images of a derelict house. On its first appearance, the music is heard in the context of disembodied environmental sounds, creating an atmosphere or impression of old dusty abandoned spaces. In the second hearing the piece is performed live, the piano part being shared among the ensemble of live instruments. The music is recontextualised and reinterpreted, transformed from the incorporeal past to the visceral present. This final sequence of the work also exemplifies the dialectical approach between sound and image in the 'The Fastness of Forgetting'. Whereas the music is very clearly present and 'live', the visual material at this point consists of a series of still images of old photographs and letters, initially colour photographs and then older black and white images which gradually fade into light. The gradually fading visual images can be seen as a metaphor for the

¹⁴ Sean Cubitt, *Digital Aesthetics*, page 100

¹⁵ *ibid.* page 101

transience of memory while the music may evoke a different field of meaning and association.

In Söke Dinkla's essay 'The Art of Narrative' the author describes the evolution of contemporary narrative structures, particularly non linear narrative forms, influenced by new media / intermedia work and interactivity. Dinkla coins the term "floating work of art" to reflect the flux and blurring of art form boundaries where images and forms are part of a continual process of change and transformation. Dinkla's discussion reflects a new aesthetic where prescriptive meaning and defined representation are replaced by works where the audience/viewer is free to navigate their way "through fields of meaning, where there is no temporal sequence and only momentary hierarchies."¹⁶ Central to the construction of these 'fields of meaning' is the use of "archetypal images"¹⁷ and their inherent symbolic content which link strongly to cultural meaning and personal memory. "A floating intellectual space emerges, a space of the 'unsaid', of 'what is on the tip of the tongue'"¹⁸, allowing for the possibility of a dynamic ambiguity and multiple interpretations of a work.

This emphasis on the interaction and imaginative engagement of the audience in the construction of meaning is a strong influence on my work and one which I hope to explore in more depth in the proposed reinterpretations of 'The Fastness of Forgetting' as an interactive installation accompanying the live performance and as a virtual interactive space. In both instances visual and sonic material from the performance version of the work, including recordings of the music performed live, will be re-contextualised in to an interactive space – one real and one virtual. In the virtual version, material from 'The Fastness of Forgetting' will be reworked into a computer game environment, as part of a research project underway at Queensland University of Technology, within the CRC in interaction design (ACID) under the guidance of Dr Andrew Brown. The intention is that users will navigate their way around a series of virtual spaces, the interface allowing the user to create and explore the environment through the combination and transformation of visual and sonic material.

Although discussion of these reworkings of 'The Fastness of Forgetting' is largely speculative at the current time, the aim of this phase of development of the work, particularly the 'virtual version', is to more fully realise the implications of a "Recombinant Poetics", a term coined by

¹⁶ Söke Dinkla, 'The Art of Narrative' in *New Screen Media Cinema / Art / Narrative*, page 37

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.* page 36

Bill Seaman in his discussion of interactive multi media works and virtual environments. He states, "Recombinant Poetics is concerned with the combination and recombination of media-elements in the service of generating emergent meaning through interactivity."¹⁹ The 'virtual version' of 'The Fastness of Forgetting' will present an interactive environment where the 'vuser' (view/user)²⁰ can create and re-create their own web of meanings and associations, can navigate their way through a memory world and be the author of their own experience.

Through the bringing together of Sound, Image and Text in a variety of contexts, in 'The Fastness of Forgetting' I attempt to create a rich web of signification and associative meaning that allows the audience (and eventually the *vuser*) to actively engage with the construction of their own interpretations of the work. Rather than prescribing a particular narrative, 'The Fastness of Forgetting' suggests a field of meanings that can result in the emergence of multiple narrative strands. My intention has been to create a work (or works) that explores the intangible nature of memory and temporality through the poetic interaction of music, space and sonic and visual imagery.

¹⁹ Bill Seaman, 'Recombinant Poetics: Emergent Explorations of Digital Video in Virtual Space', in *New Screen Media*

²⁰ *ibid.*

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